

SAVA 73-110
22 June 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Richard T. Kennedy
National Security Council Staff

SUBJECT : Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh

1. As you are doubtless well aware, one cosmetic or symbolic problem looming on the horizon is Mme. Ngo Ba Thanh, the Vietnamese intellectual to whom Columbia has offered a fellowship (and several other universities are or were thinking of honoring in some fashion) and who is now held in custody by the GVN. A 20 June cable from our Station informed us that the most recent Embassy telegram (SAIGON 10959) on Mme. Thanh has been overtaken by events and that as of the afternoon of 17 June, she was back in the police hospital in Saigon being fed intravenously. Though her condition had improved by 18 June, she adamantly insists she will continue her hunger strike unless she is placed on trial or freed unconditionally. Though at the moment, she may be out of clinical danger there does appear to be the risk that she may misjudge her hunger strike and die of physical complications caused by it. This would, of course, produce an uproar in international -- including American -- intellectual circles.

2. The events of recent days made me increasingly curious as to why Mme. Thanh had become a new symbol for the anti-war intelligentsia. I asked my colleague to analyze that phenomenon for me. is one of the government's most knowledgeable officers on matters

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Vietnamese.) Attached is the note [] gave me in response to my request. I found it enlightening and, hence, forward it informally in the thought that you might also find it of some interest.

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George A. Carver, Jr.
Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

O/DCI/SAVA:GACarver/mee

Orig - Addressee

1 - EA/DCI

1 - DDCI

1 - DDO

1 - ADDO

1 - C/EA

1 - C/VNO

1 - ONE/FE []

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21 June 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. George A. Carver, Jr.

SUBJECT : Reasons for Foreign Interest in
Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh

1. Mrs. Thanh has for some months been the object of rather more than the usual amount of solicitude shown by American and European liberal intellectuals for political prisoners held by the GVN. To keep the matter in perspective, however, it should be recalled that on past occasions there had been considerable foreign clamor on behalf of Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau and even lawyer Truong Dinh Dzu, despite the latter's reputation -- freely admitted even among Vietnamese leftist intellectuals -- for political opportunism and financial speculation. Moreover, one or two other intellectuals have at times been lionized by the intellectual left: for example, the poet Thich Nhat Hanh, who, were he now fasting in a GVN cell rather than living in Parisian comfort, would probably be inspiring as much sympathy as Mrs. Thanh.

2. A number of reasons help to explain Mrs. Thanh's current status as South Vietnam's premier political prisoner: She is a bona fide intellectual of international rank who would be at ease in a New York Review salon. She has, among other degrees, a doctorate from the "Institut de Droit Comparé" in Paris and is fully qualified to teach at Columbia or even at Yale. It is hard to think of any other prisoner in South Vietnam of whom this would be true. Mrs. Thanh's character is, so far as known, irreproachable. She has been in jail several times since 1965 and has earned a reputation for personal courage. She is a woman; and, [redacted] she can

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be persuasive and charming. Since about 1969, she has been one of the most prominent anti-government activists of the peace at any price left, and as such she had met most of the peace groups which periodically visit Saigon. No doubt her intellectual sophistication, her courage, and, not least, her pro-peace and anti-GVN views impressed them very favorably. Finally, Mrs. Thanh has apparently gone far on her hunger strike -- much further, probably, than Thich Tri Quang went on his in 1966.

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3, In 1962-63, when she was a very young (about 31) professor at the Saigon Law Faculty, Mrs. Thanh was politically moderate and even, it has been said, slightly Diemist. She got involved in a peace movement in 1965 and, according to leftist Catholic Professor [redacted] was "radicalized" by the expulsion of her father (Pham Van Huyen) from South Vietnam and, especially, by her experience in prison. Circa 1970, [redacted] told me that she was a Communist, not merely a sympathizer; but [redacted] is not at all scrupulous about such allegations, and there is no hard evidence of this. On the other hand, she headed the "Women's Association for the Right to Live," which was probably a Communist front. Plainly, she regards the Communists as a lesser evil than the GVN.

[redacted]

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